

Non-voters in 2008 and 2011 general elections: Findings from New Zealand General Social Survey

A large, light teal decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of several concentric, overlapping spiral shapes that create a sense of movement and depth.



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Purpose and summary

Non-voters in 2008 and 2011 general elections: Findings from New Zealand General Social Survey presents reasons people gave for not voting. It includes selected characteristics of the non-voters, including their age, feelings of income adequacy, labour force status, and migrant status.

The data is based on the valid responses from people who answered the 2010 and 2012 New Zealand General Social Surveys (NZGSS), and who were aged 18 years or over in the respective election years ([see Data used in this report](#)).

The report is based on self-reported voting behaviour from the NZGSS, and findings can be different from administrative data on voter turnout available from the Electoral Commission.

[See Possible differences between NZGSS and Electoral Commission data](#) for more details.

Summary of key points

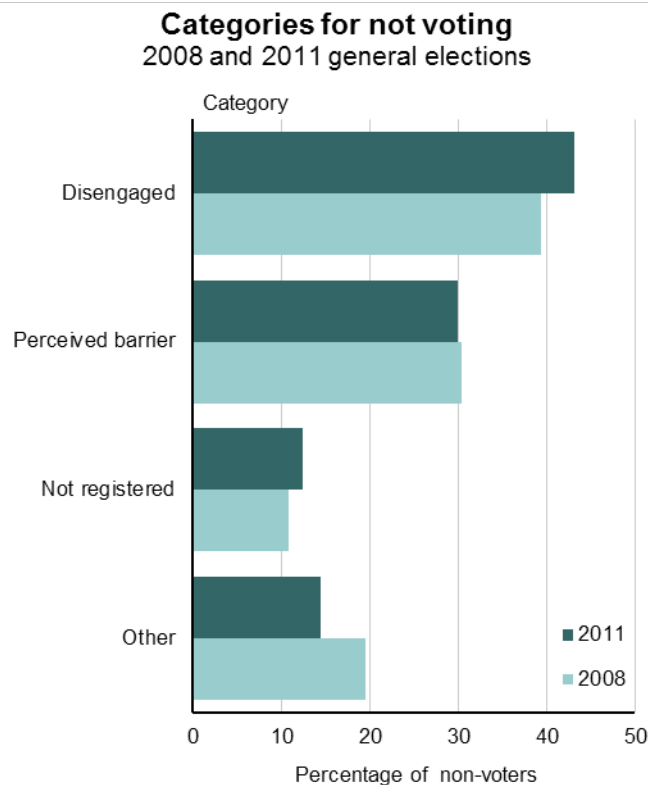
- In the 2012 NZGSS, 20 percent of people said they hadn't voted in the 2011 General Election (this includes people who said they were not enrolled or not eligible to vote).
- In the 2010 NZGSS, 19 percent of people said they hadn't voted in the 2008 General Election (this includes people who said they were not enrolled or not eligible to vote).
- 21 percent of non-voters said they did not vote in the 2011 General Election because they 'didn't get round to it, forgot or were not interested' to vote.
- A further 20 percent of non-voters in the 2011 General Election said they were not eligible or enrolled.
- Voting behaviour differed by age, labour force status, migrant status, and income adequacy. Such trends are consistent for both the 2008 and 2011 general elections.

Reasons people gave for not voting

We grouped the reasons people gave for not voting into four broad categories ([see table 1](#) for more detail):

- disengaged
- perceived barrier
- not registered
- other.

Figure 1



Source: Statistics New Zealand

The main reason people gave for not voting in the 2011 General Election was they 'didn't get round to it, forgot or were not interested' to vote. This accounted for 21 percent of the non-voters (and is included in the 'disengaged' category). Another 7.1 percent of the non-voters said they did not think their vote would have made a difference. This is a big increase from 3.9 percent in the 2008 election.

Ten percent of non-voters were 'overseas or away on the election day'. This was the most frequently selected reason in the 'perceived barriers' category.

Over 12 percent of non-voters said they did not register for the 2011 election, which equates to just over 2 percent of the total population aged 18 years and over. About 15 percent of non-voters cited 'other' reasons for not voting in the 2011 election, including not being eligible because of their visa status, or for religious reasons.

Table 1

Reasons non-voters⁽¹⁾ gave for not voting 2008 and 2011 general elections		
Reason for not voting, grouped by broad category	2008	2011
	Percent	
Disengaged	39.3	43.2
I didn't get round to it or I forgot about it/am not interested	20.6	21.0
I didn't think it was worth voting because my vote wouldn't have made a difference	3.9	7.1
I didn't think it was worth voting because it makes no difference which party is in government	8.0	7.0
I didn't think it was worth voting because politicians only care about being in power	5.2	5.1
Dislike politicians, the political system, or all parties	1.6 ⁽²⁾	3.0 ⁽²⁾
Perceived barrier	30.4	30.0
I couldn't vote because I was overseas or away	13.0	10.0
I didn't know enough about the issues or people standing for election	7.3	8.8
I didn't know about the election or how to vote	4.0 ⁽²⁾	4.4 ⁽²⁾
I couldn't vote because I couldn't get to a polling booth	4.1 ⁽²⁾	4.4 ⁽²⁾
I was working/too busy/sick on the day	2.0 ⁽²⁾	2.4 ⁽²⁾
Not registered	10.8	12.3
I couldn't vote because I wasn't registered to vote	10.8	12.3
Other	19.5	14.5
Other (includes religious reasons, not being eligible, and reasons not included above)	19.5	14.5
1. People in the 2010 and 2012 NZGSS who were aged 18 years or over and said they did not vote in the general elections. 2. Relative sampling error is 30–49.9 percent, and should be viewed with caution. Source: Statistics New Zealand		



Characteristics of non-voters

Analysing the NZGSS data shows the demographic characteristics, such as age, income adequacy, labour force status, and migrant status are associated with non-voting behaviour. The picture is similar for both the 2008 and 2011 general elections.

More non-voters in younger age group

There were more non-voters aged 18–24 years than the older age groups. Only 5.2 percent of people aged 65 years or over did not vote in the 2011 General Election, compared with 42 percent of people aged 18–24 years.

When compared across the two elections, the proportion of non-voters in the 45–64-year-age group increased significantly from 10 percent in 2008 to just over 13 percent in 2011. For other age groups, the voting behaviours were quite similar.

People with inadequate income less likely to vote

People who felt that they did not have enough money to meet everyday needs were less likely to vote. Of those who said they did not have enough money, 28 percent said they did not vote, while of those people who said they had more than enough money to meet everyday needs, fewer than 12 percent said they did not vote in 2011.

Unemployed people less likely to vote

Unemployed people were less likely to vote compared with employed people and those not in the labour force. In the 2011 General Election, 35 percent of unemployed people did not vote. This was almost double the percentage of those not in the labour force, which had a non-voter rate of just under 18 percent. Simple multivariate analysis has shown that there is a strong relationship between age and unemployment – that is a large proportion of youth are unemployed.

When compared across the 2008 and 2011 general elections, the proportion of non-voters only increased by 2 percentage points for the employed group. About 20 percent employed people did not vote in the 2011 General Election.

Recent migrants less likely to vote than long-term migrants

The NZGSS shows that migrant status is also a factor in voting behaviour. We classified migrant status into three groups for this analysis:

- born in New Zealand
- long-term migrant
- recent migrant.

We classified people who were not born in New Zealand, but arrived in the country more than five years before an election, as long-term migrants. We classified people who arrived in New Zealand five years or less before the election as recent migrants.

Almost 60 percent recent migrants did not vote in the 2011 General Election, this includes people who said they were not eligible because of visa status. The proportion of non-voters decreased for those who had been in New Zealand for longer periods of time. Long-term migrants reported very similar voting behaviour as those born in New Zealand, with 18 percent and 16 percent respectively not voting in the 2011 General Election.

When the 2008 and 2011 general elections are compared for the long-term migrant group, the proportion of non-voters increased by 4 percentage points from 14 percent in 2008 to 18 percent in 2011. For those born in New Zealand or recent migrants, the proportions of non-voters did not change much from the 2008 General Election.

Other characteristics

Those with a strong sense of belonging to New Zealand, and/or higher personal income, and/or higher qualifications are more likely to vote. The NZGSS data also showed that Asian people were the least likely to vote in the 2008 and 2011 elections, compared with those who identified as Māori, Pacific, or European. However, this is due to the large migrant population from Asia, rather than ethnicity by itself.

Table 2

Proportion of non-voters⁽¹⁾ by self-reported characteristics			
2008 and 2011 general elections			
		2008	2011
		Percent	
Sex	Female	18.1	18.5
	Male	19.2	21.4
Age group (years)	18–24	39.9	41.8
	25–44	26.5	26.2
	45–64	9.9	13.3
	65 over	6.0	5.2
Ethnic group ⁽²⁾	European	16.0	16.8
	Māori	23.6	26.8
	Pacific people	22.0	17.6
	Asian	32.6	35.3
Feeling of belonging to New Zealand	Very strongly	13.7	14.8
	Strongly	19.7	21.5
	Not very strongly	29.0	28.9
	Do not feel they belong to New Zealand	47.2	45.5
Highest qualification	No qualification	19.4	21.6
	Level 1–4 certificate	19.9	21.2
	Level 5–6 diploma	15.3	16.9
	Level 7 bachelor's degree and above	18.1	16.2
Income adequacy	More than enough	12.5	11.5
	Enough	17.0	16.9
	Just enough	21.0	23.4
	Not enough	22.5	27.9
Labour force status	Employed	17.6	19.9
	Not in the labour force	18.0	17.8
	Unemployed	41.5	35.2
Migrant status	Born in New Zealand	15.0	16.3
	Long-term migrant	14.1	18.2
	Recent migrant	60.3	59.4
Occupation	Professional	12.7	14.1
	Clerical or administrative worker	10.2 ⁽³⁾	15.2
	Manager	13.8	16.6
	Community or personal service worker	25.0	22.3
	Machinery operator or driver	21.8	24.7
	Sales worker	20.8 ⁽³⁾	25.1
	Technician or trades worker	23.0	27.3
Personal income	Labourer	26.6	28.4
	\$30,000 or less	21.8	22.8
	\$30,001 – \$70,000	17.7	20.3
	\$70,001 or more	9.8	9.5
1. People in the 2010 and 2012 NZGSS who were aged 18 years or over and said they did not vote in the general elections. 2. People were able to identify with more than one ethnic group. 3. Relative sampling error is 30–49.9 percent, and should be viewed with caution. Source: Statistics New Zealand			



Data from the New Zealand General Social Survey

About the New Zealand General Social Survey

The objectives of the New Zealand General Social Survey, which is conducted every two years, are to:

- complement other measures of societal progress by providing information on the well-being of New Zealanders aged 15 years and over (15+), across a range of aspects of life
- provide a view of how well-being varies across different groups within the population
- understand the relationships between different aspects of life and overall well-being.

NZGSS 2012, the third survey in the series, collected well-being information from about 8,500 New Zealanders aged 15+ between April 2012 and March 2013. See [New Zealand General Social Survey](#) for more information.

Data used in this report

This report used data from the NZGSS of 2010 and 2012, which collected information for the 2008 and 2011 general elections respectively. Weighted data was used to represent the number of people in New Zealand.

The NZGSS data is subjective, which is valuable in that it offers insights into the reasons some people or groups give for not voting in general elections.

The NZGSS asked people aged 18 years or over 'Did you vote in the last general election?'. If they answered 'no', they were asked to choose one of the following reasons:

11. I didn't know about the election
12. I couldn't vote because I was overseas
13. I couldn't vote because I hadn't been in NZ for long enough
14. I couldn't vote because I couldn't get to a polling booth
15. I couldn't vote because I was aged less than 18 at the time
16. I couldn't vote because I wasn't registered to vote
17. I didn't know enough about how to vote
18. I didn't know enough about the people standing for election
19. I didn't know enough about the issues
20. I didn't think it was worth voting because my vote wouldn't have made a difference
21. I didn't think it was worth voting because it makes no difference which party is in government
22. I didn't think it was worth voting because politicians only care about being in power
23. I meant to vote but didn't get round to it or I forgot about it
24. other – please specify

We grouped the reasons people gave for not voting into the following four broad categories (note that we included some of the 'other' reasons within relevant categories):

- disengagement (includes reasons 20–23 and those who said they were not interested in 24)
- perceived barrier (includes reasons 11, 12, 14, 17–19 and those who said they were working, too busy, sick, or away on election day)
- not registered (reason 16)
- other (includes religious reasons, not being eligible and reasons not included above).

Possible differences between NZGSS and the Electoral Commission data

Non-voters in 2008 and 2011 general elections is based on self-reported voting behaviour, and therefore findings can be different from administrative data on voter turnout available from the Electoral Commission's webpage [General elections 1853–2011 – dates and turnout](#).

Reasons for possible differences include:

- NZGSS collects self-reporting voting behaviour.
- The voting population used in our analysis is people aged 18 years and over in the election year who provided valid responses to the survey questions.
- The voting population used in this report includes people who were not enrolled or not eligible because of visa status, which have been classified under 'other' reasons for not voting.
- Personal weights from the survey are used for population estimation.

See the Electoral Commission's research paper, [Voter and non-voter satisfaction survey 2011](#) on voter turnout.

Definitions

Here are definitions of the variables used in this report.

Age group: *Profile of non-voters in 2008 and 2011 general elections* uses the same age grouping as the NZGSS first release, except for the young adults group, which starts at the minimum voting age of 18 years old. This is to focus on different experiences at different points in people's lives (eg growing up, learning, working, family formation, child rearing, and retirement). For this report, the age groups are:

- young adults – 18 to 24 years
- prime working age – 25 to 44 years
- middle-aged people – 45 to 64 years
- Older people – 65 years and over.

Ethnicity: the ethnic group or groups that respondents identify with or feel they belong to. Ethnicity is self-perceived and people can belong to more than one ethnic group.

Ethnicity is a measure of cultural affiliation, as opposed to race, ancestry, nationality, or citizenship.

See [New Zealand Standard Classification of Ethnicity 2005](#) for more information.

Income adequacy: is based on the respondent's self-assessment of their income (and their partner's if applicable). The respondent rates whether they had more than enough money, enough money, just enough money, or not enough money to meet their everyday need for such things as accommodation, food, clothing, and other necessities. This measure is an element of the Economic Living Standard Index (ELSI), and is not asked of respondents who are under 18 years of age.

Labour force status: a respondent's position in the labour-force in one of three groups: employed, unemployed, or not in the labour force. This measure is based on the [New Zealand Standard Classification of Labour Force Status 1999](#) and refers to the respondent's circumstances in defined time periods.

Level of education: measures a person's highest level of formal education, based on the [New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications \(2003\)](#). For this report, the 13

level 1 categories in the register are combined into four groups. Examples of the types of qualification in each group are:

- no qualification – no formal qualifications
- level 1–4 certificate – eg school certificate, sixth form certificate, university entrance, NCEA or national certificate 1, 2, 3, or 4, trade certificates, and also people with any overseas secondary school qualifications
- level 5–6 diploma – eg nursing or teaching diplomas, or advanced trade certificates
- level 7 / bachelor's degree and above – eg qualifications from university, such as bachelor's degree, post-graduate diplomas and certificates, master's degree, and doctorate.

Occupation: the major group level of [Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations](#) is used in this report. These are:

- manager
- professional
- technician or trades worker
- community or personal services worker
- clerical or administrative worker
- sales worker
- machinery operator or driver
- labourer.

Personal income: the respondent's before-tax income in the previous 12 months. It is collected as an income range rather than an actual dollar income. Income ranges are:

- \$30,000 or less
- \$30,001 – \$70,000
- \$70,001 or more.

Sense of belonging: the survey asked people, do you feel that you belong to New Zealand. The response options were:

- Yes
 - very strongly
 - strongly
 - not very strongly
- No
- Don't know or refused (excluded from the analysis).

Sex: is also included in the analysis.